DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 151 JC 860 287

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TITLE Minority Enrollment at the Fashion Institute of Technology.
PUB DATE 2 May 86
NOTE 10p.; Remarks delivered at the Chancellors Forum (Cooperstown, NY, May 2, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; *Affirmative Action; Black Students; College Admission; Equal Education; Job Placement; *Minority Groups; Recruitment; School Holding Power; Student Personnel Services; *Student Recruitment; Technical Institutes; Two Year Colleges; *Two Year College Students
IDENTIFIERS *Fashion Institute of Technology NY

ABSTRACT

In the past 15 years, Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) has developed and successfully implemented a plan to recruit, keep, and graduate minority students. The strategic plan that was developed in 1971 stressed attrition and placement as the only two criteria that would be used to measure institutional success. Minimizing attrition and ensuring placement required that an institutional climate be developed which was free from preconceived, condescending attitudes and which would make minorities feel welcome in the predominantly white college. Ongoing efforts to serve minorities include: (1) intensive recruitment campaigns involving community agencies and local high schools; (2) provision of student financial aid to most students; (3) education skills programs; (4) systematic efforts by placement counselors to respond to the special needs of minority graduates seeking jobs; and (5) special programs in Spanish and Chinese for non-English speakers. The success of these efforts is demonstrated by the increase in minority enrollments at FIT (from 3% in 1970 to 36% in 1986), low attrition rates among all FIT students, and high placement rates in the field for which the students are trained. (RO)

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Minority Enrollment at the Fashion Institute of Technology

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Remarks delivered at the Chancellors Forum
Cooperstown, N.Y.
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JC 860 287

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Remarks
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I have been asked to talk about minority enrollment at F.I.T., and I am happy to do so. This assignment required that I do something I seldom do--look back! For the first time in 15 years, I reread F.I.T.'s 1971 Strategic Plan, especially that part on minority issues. Concern for minority education at F.I.T. at that time was part of a larger issue--the role of vocational education in higher education. As I reread my notes, I found that in some ways, we have achieved our goals in that first plan magnificently! In many ways we have not.

I do not want to imply that F.I.T. has become a model in minority education for everyone to follow. For example, we still have a long way to go to reach all of the goals we had in mind for minority management at the college. But we did develop a plan that recognizes what is necessary to recruit, keep, and graduate minority students, and that's what I want to share with you today.

F.I.T., to give you a little background, is unique in several ways. F.I.T. is the largest institution of its kind in the world. It is a community college that chose to name the fashion industry as its community. We offer ten baccalaureate degrees, 17 A.A.S. degrees and a small graduate program leading to the Master of Arts. However, the majors that we offer at F.I.T. are very specific, and our program does not appeal to the general student population. In other words, we have a very limited market, and within it we have devised a deliberate strategy in minority outreach.

The history of minority enrollment in higher education in the 20th century is as complicated as most issues but is probably best summarized in the W. E. Du Bois--Booker T. Washington debates. This is not the platform to review these complicated social issues, but in our planning, F.I.T. did take a philosophical position. We believed that poverty persisted because education, as we knew it then, often failed to build sound educational paths out of poverty. We had often asked the children of poverty to follow expensive paths that lead nowhere.

As it became clear to us at F.I.T. that poverty did not respond to conventional education, we knew we would have to design a program without customary formalities and requirements. At first we called our program an upside-down curriculum. We now refer to it as a 2 + 2 program. This model of post-secondary education was not designed only for minorities but for all poor and working class people.

Although we were building a new institution during the 1970's fiscal crisis, we saw our enrollment climb from 1,200 students to 12,000 to 14,000 in just 15 years. We were building a college whose operating budget went from $6 million to $47 million in just 12 years. We were creating new applied science majors that increased from four to 17 in just seven years and then 10 baccalaureate and then master's degree programs. And we knew--despite all of our wise advisors--we had to go against all the conventional wisdom of how to organize and deliver higher education, for working people. But we knew then, and believe now, that if we were to meet our educational responsibilities to the poor and to working people, we would not provide an educational program that in large part ignored the world of work, where occupational studies were considered inferior to general studies, and where students in vocational programs did not receive the academic and liberal arts courses necessary for them to achieve their full potential.

I cannot, during the brief time I have with you, share all the strategic planning--but the result was that we decided that we would measure ourselves by two standards only--our attrition and placement. Yes, I know the purpose of higher education is not job placement--spare me those arguments. I offer these measurements to illustrate our philosophy in action, to track its effectiveness. We were seeking not just to educate people. We were seeking to prepare them accurately for professional opportunities we <u>knew</u> to exist. Our strategy was not based on guesswork or conjecture, but on solid first-hand knowledge of our industry's changing requirements. As a result, our placement record today is, we believe, the best of any comparable institution in the country--except for my own alma mater--West Point.

In order to deliver the plan, we also had to create a climate at F.I.T. for total acceptance of our goals. If we were going to free young people and old from the demeaning tyranny of unskilled employment, and if we were going to exist to facilitate upward mobility, then we had to work on the climate in our own institutional culture.

We had to work on a consciousness-raising of both the minority population that might not feel welcome in a predominantly white college and of a white faculty and staff who were constantly bombarded with stereotyped characterizations of blacks and other minorities--always remedial students, always former drug addicts, always delinquents, always without family support.

Consider the problem back in 1971. We were still facing an almost systematic attempt to denigrate totally an entire race of people in our recorded history. The attitudinal problems were mind boggling. For example, I remember one "workshop" when I listed a group of inventions and asked what they had in common--here are a few examples:

Lantern
Egg beater
Converted bed
Caps for mason jars
Shoe lasting machine
Telephone transmitter
Railway brake system
Pencil sharpener
Fountain pen
Pacemaker
Elevator

There were dozens more. Very few people at F.I.T. knew these were all black inventions. All of these patents were filed and held by blacks.

To tap the talent that all minorities have within their communities, we had to drop pre-conceived, pre-condescending attitudes. At the same time, we had to create a welcoming climate for minorities. It may sound trivial today in hindsight, but there were dozens of small, insignificant events that had to be undertaken for F.I.T. to change the climate then found there. We started a minority committee of employees committed to equal opportunity, a club called "Soul," and even deliberately set out to create a champion basketball team. Today, our Soul Club puts on fashion shows for industry and others that are so popular we cannot accommodate all the people who wish to attend. And, as some of you know, the F.I.T. Tigers have consistently brought home the Junior College Athletic Association championship banner and have gone on to the national finals three times.

Back in 1971, we created a day called "Black Solidarity;" it happened to be Martin Luther King's birthday. We asked everyone white and black to attend lectures and cultural events that took place in the local communities. Our students organized visits to the Harlem Institute of Fashion, and we worked with the Bedford Styvesant Development Corporation--to this day our students still visit the Schomberg Center at least once a year. We brought lecturers to F.I.T., and we began to search our own alumni for minority role models.

Thus, our commitment to equality in employment opportunity was and continues to be strong. It is not a rhetorical commitment, but a highly practical one. We are responding to the problem in the way we know best. We believe that a minority member's best defense against discrimination is a marketable skill. We realize that that alone will not solve the whole problem. But we do believe it is the contribution we at F.I.T. are best equipped and situated to make. So our strategy is simple and direct: we make a determined, deliberate effort to attract minority young people to F.I.T. We do <u>whatever</u> is necessary--including full subsidization of the cost of attending F.I.T.--to bring minority young people to us. Once they are at F.I.T., we make <u>whatever</u> special effort is required to help them master a marketable skill. And when they have succeeded with us, we do <u>whatever</u> is necessary to find places for them in the fashion industry.

Let me tell you first what we do in more detail and then give you such facts as I can about the results. First, I will discuss recruitment. Every year our admissions counselors attend the recruitment days sponsored by agencies seeking to attract minority students to higher education, such as the College Cooperative Centers at Buffalo and Syracuse, the National Scholarship Service for Negro Students, Youth Service Agencies, Neighborhood Youth Corps, the Pan Hellenic Council of New York, ASPIRA, the Manhattan and Brooklyn Urban Centers, the Board of Cooperative Educational Services, and various high school upward bound programs.

We have a special program for minorities with the Vocational Foundation of New York. We recruit intensively at a number of urban high schools and have cooperative ventures with some of them. When the pool (and remember our pool is relatively small because, believe it or not, not too many people are interested in the fashion industries) was declining from these sources, we started a program called "Saturday Live". Today we

bring close to 900 kids from the 11th and 12th grades to F.I.T. for 11 consecutive Saturdays each semester and during the summer. Minority kids come to us from as far away as Delaware for this program. "Saturday Live" insures that our admissions people have contact with all the high schools in our area.

Furthermore, most of our students receive financial aid. And, in addition to the $6 million of B.E.O.G. and TAP, our private corporate support provides our financial aid office with over $600,000 a year in scholarship funds to glue the financial aid programs together.

Do these efforts work? I believe they do. In 1970, F.I.T. minority enrollment was 3% of the total. This year, including Hispanics and Asians, minority enrollment is 36%. Of that figure, well over 15% are Black. While those numbers do not excite our minority leaders, remember, today F.I.T. accepts only about 35% of its qualified applicants. And today, we have a new problem. We are totally out of space, and the numbers of college transfers and college graduates that apply for our majors are expanding most rapidly. We, therefore, monitor closely the efforts we make in selected New York City high schools.

We also know that the working poor need F.I.T. for advancement and monitor our continuing education. This year 48% of 8,000 people in continuing education, are minorities--25% Black, 12% Hispanic, and 11% Asian. Now, once they are at F.I.T., special efforts are made for all students, full and part-time, to succeed. In our full-time day program, about 300 are enrolled in a federally financed education skills program.

Do these efforts succeed? Clearly they do. F.I.T's overall attrition rate is low--about 20%. And minority students "make it" at F.I.T.--complete their courses of study in the same high proportions as the student body as a whole.

As I said earlier, F.I.T.'s Placement Department is as effective as any in the nation, and minority students are full--if not favored--participants in that process. Placement counselors make special, systematic efforts to respond to the special needs of minority graduates seeking jobs. Counselors assist small groups in the mechanics of resume and portfolio preparation, interview techniques, and employer expectations. Successfully employed minority graduates are regularly invited back to the college to meet with small groups of minority students for frank, practical discussions of the

special problems, if any, of finding suitable jobs and advancing in them. Our Placement Office will not accept job orders that smack of discrimination. We insist that all employers specify salary and qualifications and permit applicants to compete on the basis of competence alone.

Do these efforts succeed? Apparently they do. Minority graduates of F.I.T. promptly find jobs for which they trained in the same high proportion as the graduate body as a whole. Minority students do as well in finding jobs as any of our graduates. I routinely ask our Placement Department to prepare a special detailed report of minority placements. It shows placements in every specialty in companies of all shapes and sizes. Minority graduates in fashion design, interior design, textile technology, display, photography, management engineering, fashion buying and merchandising, textile design, fashion illustration, advertising communications are finding careers at Springs Mills, Cone Mills, Macy's, Kayser Roth, Bloomingdales, Phillips-Van Heusen, Bonwit's, McCalls, Bergdorf-Goodman, Bobbie Brooks, J. C. Penney, and dozens of other companies large and small.

Some of these graduates are dramatically and visibly successful. In design; there are Jon Haggins, Arthur McGee, John Weston, James Clarke, Stephen Burrows, Harold Stone, Jamie McDonald and Lloyd Williams, all of whom own their own businesses; Tom Brandle, bridal designer for Joy Time; Tom Duke, stylist for Stylemaker Fabrics; and Alice Hankerson, textile designer for Galey and Lord. In merchandising, Michelle Thompkins has advanced to buyer at Bloomingdale's. Doug Patterson is production manager/ engineer at Joseph II; Joye Fridia is a junior perfumer at Naarden; Alfred Fornay is executive editor of "Ebony-man"; and Chantol Paret Antoine is an interior designer at Swanke, Hayden, Connell Architects.

Some special programs are available to minority students in the Continuing Education Division. A special program taught in Spanish is offered in the Pattern Making Department, and in Production Management. We work with the Chinatown Planning Council and teach similar courses in Chinese. There is a special "Taste of College" program for academically disadvantaged high-school dropouts.

Some years ago, when we were unable to identify black-owned businesses on 7th Avenue, we created a corporation called FIDCO--Fashion Industry Development Corporation. We leased a loft and with the support of industry, launched a program without S.B.A. or MESBEC to create black-owned businesses. One of the results of this effort was the creation of the Department of Small Business Development, which has had an ongoing minority development program. As a matter of fact, in May more than 350 people attended our fifth workshop on minority enterprises. Out of FIDCO came people like Di Willis, and Ruben Cruz who are successful entrepreneurs.

Finally, we had one other attitudinal problem to fix. That was an attitude which dismissed vocational education as something for the misfit or the dull person. Vocational education was necessary or perhaps now and again good... but always for someone else's children. This attitude was shared by educators, parents, students, and even most minority leaders. We had to redefine vocational education, and then provide it with the same quality, and the same environment found in the most prestigious colleges in America. We redefined it so well that today we cannot begin to accommodate the applications to F.I.T., white or black. Today, we are asked to create similar colleges in Paris, Italy, Japan, New Delhi, and even China.

Our definition sees vocational education embracing, but not confined to, learning techniques. It sees such skills used not merely to prepare for tasks but as supplements to verbal skills in the entire learning process. Those papers you receive twice a year from my office are part of the on-going process of constantly re-evaluating F.I.T. and the role of vocational education. We keep an on-going faculty development program so that our practical arts, our liberal arts, and our fine arts remain integrated.

As a result of our model, last month the State Legislature asked us to participate in a new $400,000 study to examine the way we deliver other programs in vocational education in our state and how it should be organized in the future. So we believe our simple strategy is successful. We are succeeding in attracting growing numbers of minority young people at F.I.T. They are succeeding with us. They are finding suitable jobs, in which some of them succeed spectacularly. I believe the fashion industry welcomes these minority graduates. I see it as an industry with an unusual preemptive respect for talent--for skill--where everyone is welcome! If we do our job well, the fashion industry

responds. And I believe it is responding. And when we achieve the same results in increasing the number of minority administrators at F.I.T., we will be a little more satisfied.

Finally, let me conclude by quoting from a talk I gave to our faculty written 15 years ago. "We have a triple reason to become exemplary in the field of affirmative action:

1) We must do it in the interests of fairness.

2) We must, as a public institution, conform both to the letter and spirit of the law.

And 3) We must do it as a matter of professional pride.

What is remarkable and distinctive about American society is its cultural diversity. That is what we are. That is the source of our strength and legitimacy. Other cultures are notable for their continuity, their homogeneity--and we honor them for it. But our distinction is in our cultural pluralism. Its roots are in the fact that we are overwhelmingly a nation of immigrants and exclusively a nation of minorities. There is no American majority; we are a mosaic of minorities. The largest single ethnic strain is made up of Americans of British ancestry, but they make up only 15%. German-Americans are 13%; Black Americans 11%. As a cultural institution, F.I.T. must be a kind of microcosm of the larger culture of which we are part. Otherwise, we are incomplete.

There is another more sentimental reason why we at F.I.T. should be exemplary in the full representation of minorities. It is, in a way, our destiny to do so. Our industries have traditionally been a principal threshold for outsiders. The ready-to-wear business and all its peripheral businesses were practically a product of discrimination. Immigrant Jews from eastern Europe--refugees really--created these businesses because they were unwelcome in existing industries. And once it existed, the industry became the point of entry for hundreds of thousands of Italians. Now Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians can follow that tradition in what we do at F.I.T.

Thank you.

6/11/86

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